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ABSTRACT

Library environments and the methods of providing services to library patrons are drastically changing with the availability of new technologies. Online public access catalogs are replacing card catalogs, CD-ROM databases have encroached upon the domain of their paper counterparts, and newspapers, encyclopedias, and dictionaries are also available in automated formats. Consequently, library roles have been affected as well. For example, technical services librarians are becoming the human interface to bring technology to the patron. In this paper, a technical services librarian shares her personal experiences as she ventured into the world of public services, otherwise known as the "patron zone." The librarian identifies the challenges she encountered during her career transition as well as the technical skills that she brought to the reference desk, the bibliographic instruction classroom, and the OPAC (online public access catalog) training session. (Author/MAB)

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THE PATRON ZONE, or
WHAT'S A NICE CATALOGER LIKE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are indeed in a changing environment. With the technologies now available in our libraries, we have many new ways to bring our patrons to the information they seek. Online public access catalogs are replacing card catalogs, CD-ROM databases are shoving their paper counterparts aside, not to mention our comfortable old friends-- the newspaper, encyclopedia, and dictionary which are also available in automated format.

Librarians are changing too. Technical services librarians are becoming the human interface to bring technology to the patron. Just what does a technical services librarian bring to the reference desk? To the bibliographic instruction classroom? To the OPAC training session?

In this paper, I would like to share my personal experiences as a technical services librarian who has purposely ventured into the world of public services and entered the "patron zone".

I think of my job as Head of Cataloging, with duties and

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responsibilities as principal cataloger and database maintenance librarian as an important public service. In fact, each year in my annual report, I begin by stating that the Catalog Department provides an important public service in the cataloging, classification, retrospective conversion and online bibliographic control of library materials in all formats. To put it in layman's terms, our prime responsibility is to provide access to library materials by physically describing the item; analyzing its contents through the use of subjects, names, and series; physically labeling the item; and then coding that information for computer input so patrons and library staff can readily access the item record online.

Some of you may be skeptical. Did she say that cataloging was a public service? Yes, I believe this to be true, but that's a topic to be addressed in another paper. I suspect, however, that I could get agreement by restating my remarks and saying that cataloging provides an indirect public service through the cataloging, classification, etc. of library materials.

Catalogers have been permitted to walk along the borders of the "patron zone", but generally have not been permitted to step across. Having walked along the border for 9 years, I decided that I wanted in. There was more to librarianship than the "back room". I wanted contact, I wanted gratification, and I wanted feedback from those I was servicing, or rather, indirectly servicing. I had no desire to dwell in the windowless back room or the basement which used to be a book stack area, which is often the home of technical services staff. I didn't want to be sur-

rounded by just library materials 40+ hours a week. Contrary to popular belief, catalogers do like people. Yet, I thoroughly enjoy the challenges of automation, and the independence and Sherlock Holmes investigations that cataloging has to offer. I wanted to retain primary duties in technical services, but I also wanted some frontline public services responsibilities. So, armed with my limited recall of Reference and Collection Management 101 and 7 years of cataloging experience, I set off to convince prospective employers that I could also be successful in reference, given opportunities for training and practice. You would have thought that I was asking for a maintenance free union database, or a world without downtime!

The following were some common responses received during interviews and discussions about the position I was seeking to create and obtain:

- * What's a cataloger with your expertise and background want to do in public services? You are needed in technical services.

- * We have a backlog at our institution and we couldn't possibly loan you to another department.

- * The threat of reciprocation was present. Reference staff most assuredly did not want to catalog.

- * You have NO experience. [How does one get experience, if no one will give you the opportunity?]

- * Your vocabulary is too technical. Patrons won't be able to understand you if you talk about LCSH, AACR2, interfaces, and bibliographic records.

I was disheartened, but continued to job search. Finally, I found an employer who was willing to take the risk and allow a

cataloger into the patron zone. I was hired as Head of Monograph Cataloging, but was to provide public catalog information 2-3 hours a week at the catalog information desk. The role of the catalog information desk person was to aid the patron in making the transition from a card catalog to online catalog environment through one-on-one online training and a little "hand holding" if necessary. The thinking behind this was who better to instruct the patron in how to interpret the catalog, but those who helped to create it. This was an idea I wholeheartedly supported.

The catalog information desk was attached to the main reference desk in sort of a nightly newsdesk fashion. There were usually 3 of us on duty as the reference desk was generally double staffed. Desktops were equipped with computer terminals and telephones. When not busy with catalog queries, I listened to my reference colleagues and was able to pick up some basic reference skills. Most were quite willing to share their expertise. This was a very busy undergraduate library and I was asked to answer the phone and acknowledge the patron when both reference staff members were away from the desk handling other queries. I was instructed to put the patron on hold and alert the reference staff that a call was waiting. After several months, my duties were expanded and I was asked to conduct brief reference interviews to determine whether general library information, a transfer to a specific department, or directory-type information was sought. I was asked to handle these basic queries if I felt comfortable in doing so. More research oriented questions were to be forwarded to reference staff. If not busy, I was

encouraged to follow reference staff as they searched through relevant reference tools to satisfy the patron's request for information. As a result, a mentoring relationship developed.

Reference staff also learned from me. Technical services staff were the first to learn the online system because of inputting, loading, and maintenance issues. I felt I had a solid understanding of searching capabilities and the intricacies of the system. Reference staff enjoyed learning searching "tricks", particularly the more difficult authority searching which is the bane of most online catalogs. With the support from my reference colleagues, I was able to convince library administration that I would be a good patron trainer for the online catalog. I designed several basic searching modules, recruited additional technical services staff support at the catalog information desk, and began formal online catalog training sessions for patrons, giving reference staff a little more time to get familiar with the online system. Eventually, bibliographic instruction staff took over online catalog training responsibilities.

This experience gave me a taste of the world of public services and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It gave me the opportunity to receive direct feedback from patrons. I became aware of the kinds of information they sought and the types of questions they asked. I also witnessed the fact that they weren't always clear on what they needed, nor how to ask for it. I saw how they approached their "quest" for needed information. It was particularly rewarding when I could lead the patron to an item I had just cataloged or had seen recently come through the cataloging department. I also became more acquainted with faculty as my

one-on-one online training sessions while at the catalog information desk were often preferred to the group sessions which were offered. Mutual collegial support was an added benefit. We each had an opportunity to see the other in action and grew to appreciate the knowledge and professionalism demonstrated. I was even invited to an occasional lunch with reference staff.

Life wasn't thoroughly rosy. There were a few reference staff members who felt that I was invading their territory, stealing their faculty, taking away their work, and/or giving out substandard information. Afterall, I wasn't a "real" reference staff member. Reference staff who felt this way were also the ones still uneasy at the prospect of maybe someday having to reciprocate-- and catalog. I was reminded about the backlog and instead of spending my 3 hours a week at the desk, I could have been cataloging more books, in particular, the ones they had been waiting ages to receive. This negative feedback was minimal and I felt my reference experience was a very successful and positive one. Working at the catalog information desk gave me a great introduction to providing supplemental reference service.

In my next and present job, I have ventured a little further into the patron zone. I found another institution willing to take the risk and allow me to "tailor" my job to include public services responsibilities. In this position I have responsibilities for supplemental reference service, bibliographic instruction, online and CD-ROM database searching, collection development, and faculty liaising, in addition to traditional cataloging and automation responsibilities.

This time, the institution is smaller and provides more opportunity for multifaceted librarianship to occur naturally. In many cases, we have to be Jacks and Jills of all trades. But there were still doubts about my reference abilities. I was afterall, a cataloger. Would I be too technical? How much training and experience did I really have? Would I require additional training? What would be the quality of the service I provided? I had some of the same doubts myself, but I was determined and felt up to the task.

I would now like to focus on some specific points that my experience has provided and make some general observations and comments concerning technical services librarians providing direct public services. I will begin with what I feel are positive factors to consider.

I believe that technical services librarians are a positive human interface for the patron and the online catalog. Many of us have lived through the transition from manual to automated cataloging systems and have experienced the frustrations and fears of automation and survived admirably and have even lived to tell about it. We've helped our staff through these changes and are well equipped to aid patrons as well.

Catalogers like people too and can be personable. As for our language barrier, I think it is hardly noticeable that English is our second language. I can switch from English to AACR2ese quite proficiently.

Technical services librarians often have subject specialties and after becoming familiar with basic book, etc. review sources and working with respective faculty, we are able to perform

collection development responsibilities quite successfully.

Bibliographic instruction sessions are quite interesting when delivered from the perspective of a technical services librarian. I tend to focus on the online catalog and offer tips on how to search it. I spend a little time on interpretation of the catalog record and the relation of subjects to classification. This helps the patrons become better browsers of the collection and users of the online catalog. I elaborate on the new technologies available in the library and describe general library services. Show and tell and a library tour point out these service areas. I am able to share information about new titles ordered, just recently cataloged, or new audiovisual titles which were just previewed for cataloging. I can easily commiserate with students in their search for information as I often feel the same way when tracking down "fresh" information while at the reference desk. I don't always find it the first time around, but the "hunt" makes me a better researcher and it becomes easier the second time. I spend a little time on how and where to begin "hunting" for information. Positive liaisons with faculty are developed and I work very closely with them in identifying new library materials. We also discuss what type of assignments students are working on so I can better prepare my bibliographic instructions. They are particularly pleased when I tell them when their books are in. I must admit, I do more RUSH cataloging as a result.

The new technologies coming into our libraries like CD-ROM databases and telecommunications software packages seem less

threatening as we have sort of "grown up" with technology. Online catalogs are our friends.

Here are a few drawbacks or negative factors to consider.

Because I'm only providing supplemental reference, and my office is not physically located near the reference department, I am not always privy to all reference news. Sometimes it is forgotten that I am in the "back room" and need to be notified of a change of agenda, schedule, or meeting.

There are times when I feel like an outsider. I don't quite feel part of the reference staff.

There is self doubt. Is the patron getting the best information possible or is the patron getting second class service from me because I am not as well trained and experienced as my reference colleagues?

Three hours a week at the desk is so little time to learn. Training is limited. In the beginning we were able to double staff the reference desk and I was able to learn from my more experienced colleagues. Double staffing was a wonderful training mechanism and it did wonders for moral support. There were times that I felt between the two of us, we knew everything that was worth knowing. My security blanket was taken away about a year ago and I find myself giving the patron more referrals for information, my limited experience not quite able to handle the variety of queries received. I haven't had enough "desk" time to really get to know the collection. I already miss the opportunities for continued training and the camaraderie working frontline and learning from my reference colleagues.

Because I give out "back room" information about when items

are received and when they will be cataloged to my faculty, I've somewhat spoiled them into thinking that they can have immediate access to everything-- or worse, that liaison is a synonym for slave. I have often had to clarify my liaison role. Photocopy and delivery services are not part of our relationship.

I could go on forever, but time will not allow. My intent was to share with you my personal experiences as a technical services librarian who has ventured into the patron zone. I hope my insights have given you new ideas, opportunities and challenges to think about. I hope I have opened your mind to possibilities. I would like to conclude by addressing my last few remarks to library directors and personnel administrators, and to those of you technical services librarians who have even a spark of interest in pursuing this type of position.

Take the risk! Your patrons will benefit as your staff becomes more versatile and better equipped to meet the challenges that technology and information present. You can offer opportunities for attracting the best and the brightest staff into your libraries with the promise of multifaceted librarianship. After all, we're in the business together and we all share a common mission-- SERVICE.

As a cataloger, I am delighted to be permitted to traverse back and forth into the patron zone. I find my job more interesting and fulfilling. There are now new opportunities for job enrichment, professional development, and personal growth for me. I almost feel like Pinocchio-- I am now a real librarian!